

THIS MONTH

While Windows Vista might be the big product of the moment, this month's *What's New* is crammed full of products that will appeal whether or not you've got a shiny new Vista PC.

Sony's DVD Architect Studio is one of the most interesting products in our Software section. For years we've been saying Sony should unbundle this software from the Vegas Movie Studio suite, and finally Sony has listened. The result is the most powerful, flexible and user-friendly DVD authoring software around for under £100. See page 48 for details.

If you've been put off by the high price of Blu-ray and HD-DVD players, our review of Microsoft's Xbox 360 HD-DVD Player on page 34 shows you how you can upgrade your Xbox 360 to play HD-DVD for just £130 including VAT – remarkable value.

This month we also review Fujifilm's FinePix F31fd, which has face-detection technology to make portrait shots easier to take. We also review Billion's BiPAC 7404VGP wireless router, which has a serious firewall and can route VoIP calls, and Nokia's N800 internet tablet. There's something for everyone, whether you've got a serious job to do or simply want to get more creative.

David Ludlow
Deputy Editor

david@computershopper.co.uk



PC NEXTDAY

Zoostorm 6-5202 Lifestyle

★★★★★

£843 inc VAT

Mini PCs are much smaller than their mid-tower cousins, but often lack the performance and expandability of their larger counterparts. PC Nextday's 6-5202 Lifestyle PC doesn't have a lot of room inside its case for adding upgrades, but it's well specified in almost every other respect.

The Lifestyle is the first PC we've seen to use Intel's new 8GHz Core 2 Duo E4300 processor, which has a slower frontside bus (FSB) speed than processors higher up the Core 2 Duo range. It also lacks support for virtualisation, but it performed almost as well in our benchmarks as a 1.866GHz Core 2 Duo E6300-based PC. Whether you want to encode video, edit your photos or do both at the same time, the Lifestyle is more than powerful enough. You won't need to upgrade its memory any time soon, either, as the provided 2GB is plenty for running several applications simultaneously.

The Lifestyle can also be used as a media centre PC. The hybrid TV tuner and remote control mean you can record either analogue or digital TV broadcasts and watch them later using Windows XP Media Center Edition. You can't record one channel while watching another without adding another USB tuner, though. The 250GB hard disk is large enough to store many programmes, but you'll want to replace it with a bigger disk if you're a TV addict or if you're planning to edit video in a big way.

With an Nvidia GeForce 7600GT graphics card, the Lifestyle can play today's 3D games at high resolutions, as shown by its respectable score of 48.1 frames per second (fps) in our Doom 3 test. But for the most demanding

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PC Nextday Zoostorm 2-5404 Versatile PC	★★★★★
PC Nextday Zoostorm 6-5202 Lifestyle	★★★★★

Notebooks page 16

Apple MacBook	★★★★
Evesham Voyager C720DC	★★★★
Panasonic Toughbook CF-W5	★★★★
PC Nextday Zoostorm 55-7701	★★★★★
Samsung Q35 Red	★★★★★
Toshiba Satellite Pro A120 SE-163	★★★★★

Handhelds page 22

Blaupunkt TravelPilot Lucca 3.3	★★★★★
Navicore Personal 2007 Multiplatform package	★★★★★
Nokia E61	★★★★★
Nokia N800 Internet Tablet	★★★★★
Sony Ericsson K800i	★★★★★
TomTom One Regional	★★★★★

Printers & Scanners page 24

Canon PIXMA iP4300	★★★★★
Canon PIXMA MP160	★★★★★
Canon Selphy ES1	★★★★★
Dell Multifunction Laser Printer 1815dn	★★★★★
Epson AcuLaser C1100	★★★★★
Epson Perfection 4490 Photo	★★★★★
HP Photosmart D7160	★★★★★
HP Scanjet G4010	★★★★★
Konica Minolta Magicolor 5550	★★★★★
Samsung ML-2510	★★★★★

Displays page 28

Dell 3400MP	★★★★★
Formac Gallery 2010 Xtreme 5	★★★★★
HP LP2065	★★★★★
Iiyama X486S-B1	★★★★★
LG 32LC2D	★★★★★
Panasonic PT-AE900E	★★★★★
Samsung 215TW	★★★★★
ViewSonic N2060w	★★★★★

Photography page 30

Canon EF 28-200mm f/3.5-5.6 USM	★★★★★
Canon EOS 400D	★★★★★
Canon PowerShot A710 IS	★★★★★
Casio Exilim Zoom EX-Z850	★★★★★
Fujifilm FinePix F20 Zoom	★★★★★
Fujifilm FinePix F31fd	★★★★★
Nikon Coolpix L4	★★★★★
Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ50	★★★★★
Sigma 18-200mm f/3.5-6.3 DC	★★★★★
Signa 18-50mm f/3.5-5.6 DC	★★★★★
Tamron 18-200mm XR Di II	★★★★★



PC SYSTEMS

FAQ

games, such as Call of Duty 2, you'll have to lower the resolution and graphical detail, or replace the graphics card with a more powerful model.

You won't be embarrassed to place the Lifestyle in your living room, thanks to its attractive glossy black and silver case, which is around the size of a bread bin. Although it isn't the quietest PC we've heard, it's unlikely to annoy you in everyday use. There's not enough space inside the case to add a long or double-width graphics card, though, or one with a large fan. There's also no space for adding another internal hard disk or another PCI card. Fortunately, the computer already has a wide range of ports and extras, including a memory card reader and FireWire ports.

Although the 19in AOC widescreen monitor is ideal for watching DVDs or for working on two documents side by side, its

image quality isn't well suited to editing images. Photos looked grainy, and there was noticeable banding in the darker shades of our greyscale gradient test, rather than a smooth transition towards black.

We were also disappointed by the included Genius stereo speakers, which sound harsh and distort at high volumes. Thankfully, the Lifestyle has a coaxial S/PDIF port, so you can connect a surround-sound amplifier and speakers. At least you won't have to replace the Microsoft USB keyboard and mouse which, though basic, are comfortable to use.

The Lifestyle is an attractive mini PC that's fast in Windows. It has plenty of RAM and a hybrid TV tuner, but it's let down by its poor monitor and speakers. It's less than ideal as a family PC, but it is good value if you intend to use it as a media centre.

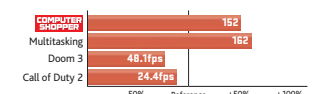
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Fast in Windows
- ✓ Hybrid TV tuner
- ✗ Poor monitor and speakers

DESKTOP PC 1.8GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E4300, 2GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, 256MB Nvidia GeForce 7600GT, DVD+/-RW +/- DL, 19in widescreen LCD
SUPPLIER sales@pcnextday.co.uk
DETAILS www.pcnextday.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



Q Now that Windows Vista has been launched, will Windows XP no longer be supported by Microsoft or third-party applications?

A Although free phone support for Windows XP will end in April 2009, Microsoft will continue to provide paid-for phone support until 2016. Windows XP Home, Professional and Media Center Edition will also receive security updates until 2016 via Windows Update. However, if you haven't applied the Service Pack 2 update, then Microsoft won't provide any support at all. For more details, see News on page 197.

The vast number of Windows XP users means that software and hardware developers are likely to continue developing new products and providing technical support for XP for the next few years. Similarly, many products available today will work with Windows 98 and ME; Microsoft only ended support for those versions of Windows last year.

Alan Lu
PC systems and storage expert

alan@computershopper.co.uk



Video page 34

Canon MV960	★★★★
Freecom DVB-T USB Stick	★★★★
Humax Duovisio PVR-9200T	★★★★
Microsoft Xbox 360 HD-DVD Player	★★★★
SlingMedia Slingbox	★★★★
Terratec Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity	★★★★

Audio page 36

Apple iPod Shuffle	★★★★
Iriver Cliv 4GB	★★★★
Logitech AudioStation	★★★★
Logitech X-230	★★★★
Logitech Z-5450	★★★★
Philips SLA5520	★★★★
Sandisk Sansa e270	★★★★
Tapco LinkUSB	★★★★
Terratec Headset Master 5.1 USB	★★★

Networks page 38

Billion BiPAC 7404VGP	★★★★
Devolo DLAN 200 AVdesk Starter Kit	★★★★
D-Link RangeBooster N 650 Router	★★★★
D-Link Wireless Internet Camera	★★★
Futuro Luna	★★★★

Storage page 40

Akasa Integral Fusion	★★★★
Buffalo DriveStation Duo 500GB	★★★★
Buffalo LinkStation Pro 250GB	★★★★
Iomega Desktop Hard Drive 320GB	★★★★
Samsung SpinPoint T133 HD401LJ	★★★★
TrekStor DataStation pocket x.u 120GB	★★★★
Western Digital 500GB My Book Pro Edition	★★★★
Western Digital Passport 120GB	★★★★

Components page 42

Antec Nine Hundred	★★★★
Antec P150	★★★★
ECS KN3 SLI2	★★★★
ECS PN1 SLI2 Extreme	★★★★
Gigabyte GV-RX195P256D-RH	★★★★
Intel Core 2 Duo E6700	★★★★
Sapphire X1950 Pro AGP	★★★★
ZeroTherm BTF95	★★★
ZeroTherm CF800	★★★★

Software & Games page 46

Acronis True Image 10 Home	★★★★
Avanquest Radio Tracker 2	★★★★
Cakewalk Sonar 6 Producer Edition	★★★★
Cloudmark Desktop for Outlook	★★★★
Company of Heroes	★★★★
Diskeeper 2007 Home	★★★★
EA Need for Speed: Carbon	★★★
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	★★★★
FIFA 2007	★★★★
FlatOut 2	★★★★
Magix Audio Cleaning Lab XXL	★★★★
McAfee Wireless Protection 2007	★★
Microsoft AutoRoute 2007	★★
Microsoft Encarta Reference Library 2007	★★★★
Microsoft Works Suite 2006	★★★★
Mozilla Firefox 2.0	★★★★
Mr Site Takeaway Website	★★★★
Roxio Easy Media Creator 9 Suite	★★★★
Sierra Caesar IV	★★★
Sony DVD Architect Studio	★★★★
Sony Vegas Movie Studio +DVD Platinum Edition 6	★★★★
Steinberg Cubase 4	★★★
Symantec Norton Ghost 10	★★★★
Tenormichi 3D Media Centre Gold	★★★
THQ Supreme Commander	★★★★
VCom Partition Commander 10 Professional	★★★★
Wacom Colorelli	★★★★
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Dark Crusade	★★★★

BYTE SIZE

NIMZY Vibro Max

★★
£66 inc VAT

The Nimzy Vibro Max sounds like something you'd find in an sex shop, but it's actually a travel speaker system for your MP3 player. It consists of a small cube, on the bottom of which is a rubber foot that vibrates with the audio signal. Putting the cube on a surface turns it into a speaker.

Results varied depending on the kind of surface we used. Solid desks produced a warm sound, while doors and glass were louder but harsh. We were generally impressed with the sound quality, but felt the Nimzy wasn't loud enough.

It's compact and sounds reasonable, but is expensive and can't run on batteries.

Chris Fynamore

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.thakral-dit.com

SWEEX HM402 Soft Fit Headset Deluxe

★★★★★
£9 inc VAT

If you want to chat over the internet using a service such as Skype, it's easiest to use a headset with a built-in microphone. Sweex's HM402 is a chunky PC headset with a fold-down microphone. Its twin 3.5mm jacks plug into your PC's headphone and microphone sockets. You may have to unplug any analogue surround-sound speakers first, though, and use Control Panel to change your speaker settings.

This headset sounds clear and is comfortable, but a USB headset such as Trust's HS-4080 can be plugged into or removed from a spare USB port as needed. Windows configures USB sound devices automatically, so they involve less fiddling about.

Chris Fynamore

SUPPLIER www.redstone.com
DETAILS www.sweex.com

EMACHINES E4076

★★★★
£299 inc VAT

If you want to buy a new PC but want the freedom to choose your own monitor, or you already have a display you're happy with, there's little sense in buying a whole new system. Emachines' E4076 comes without a monitor and, at less than £300, is one of the cheapest PCs we've reviewed.

The E4076 has an Intel Pentium 4 processor and 512MB of RAM. While this is enough for running Windows, browsing the web and general office work, you'll want another 512MB for running several programs simultaneously or for tough jobs such as manipulating photos. As it is, the E4076 recorded low scores in our image-editing and multiple-applications tests, but did manage a respectable score in our video-editing benchmark.

This computer's integrated graphics chip uses 64MB of system memory, reducing the amount available to Windows. It limped through our graphical tests, and isn't up to playing the latest 3D games. You can plug a more powerful graphics card into the PCI Express x16 slot. Even if you don't want to play games, you may want to add a graphics card if you have a DVI-equipped monitor; the E4076 has only a D-sub video output. Aside from the PCI Express x16 slot, there's a free PCI Express x1 slot and two PCI slots inside this computer's mini-tower case. One PCI slot is occupied by a modem, but if you have a broadband internet connection this can be removed to make more room for useful peripherals such as a TV tuner or FireWire card.

If you want to store lots of photos, videos and music, the 120GB hard disk will begin to



fill up quickly. There's space for adding one more internal disk, or you can add an external hard disk via one of the five USB2 ports. There's also a memory card reader for copying photos from the most common card types. No speakers are included, but you can connect a 5.1-channel surround-sound set to the standard analogue outputs. The old-fashioned ball mouse is comfortable to hold, though inaccurate, while the keyboard feels too spongy for anything other than occasional typing. The software bundle isn't overly generous, but does include useful titles such as Microsoft Works 8.5, and DVD-burning and -playback software from CyberLink.

If you have modest computing needs, the cheap and basic E4076 is a competent PC, but there's not much room inside the case for adding upgrades. Spending £100 more on a system such as PC Nextday's Zoostorm 1-3302, reviewed in our budget PCs Labs, *Shopper* February 2007, gets you better performance and a larger hard disk as well as a monitor.

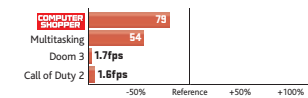
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Inexpensive
- ✗ Not enough RAM or disk space
- ✗ Limited expansion options

DESKTOP PC 3.06GHz Intel Pentium 4 524, 512MB RAM, 120GB hard disk, ATI Radeon Xpress 200, DVD+/-RW +/- DL
SUPPLIER Staples 0800 692 9292
DETAILS www.emachines.com

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



Also consider...

PCNEXTDAY Zoostorm 2-5404 Versatile PC

★★★★★
£749 inc VAT

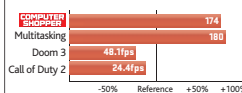
BEST BUY The Zoostorm's case may be bland and awkward to open, but there's plenty of space inside for future upgrades. There's no case fan to expel warm air, so it's not particularly loud when in use. PC

Nextday has fitted a wireless network card, so it's easy to connect to a wireless broadband router if you have one.

This computer has a 2.13GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E6400 processor. It performed well in our benchmarks with an overall score of 174. It also performed well in our 3D game tests. It managed



DESKTOP PC 2.13GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E6400, 1GB RAM, 320GB hard disk, 256MB Nvidia GeForce 7600GT, DVD+/-RW +/- DL, DVD-ROM, 19in LCD
SUPPLIER sales@pcnextday.co.uk
DETAILS www.pcnextday.co.uk
✓ Performs well in 2D and 3D; three-year warranty
FULL REVIEW Mar 2007



48.1fps in Doom 3 and 24.4fps in Call of Duty 2, so it's fast enough for occasional gaming.

The 19in AOC monitor has no serious flaws. It exhibited good colour balance and contrast. PCNextday provides a three-year onsite warranty, helping to make the Zoostorm a great-value general-purpose PC with something for everyone.

GLADIATOR Atlas CB3800

★★★★

£699 inc VAT

Mini PCs are far more transportable than their larger midi-tower counterparts. Gladiator has emphasised this by including a carry case with its latest compact PC, the Atlas CB3800. Unfortunately, while the Atlas is a competent computer, there isn't much else to distinguish it.

It looks smart with its matching black peripherals. It has an Athlon 64 X2 3800+ processor and 1GB of RAM. It performed well in all the *Shopper* benchmarks, making it suitable as an all-round family PC, but it's not as fast as other similarly priced systems with an Intel Core 2 Duo processor.

The Atlas's reliance on an integrated graphics chip means it won't be capable of playing modern 3D games. You can improve its 3D performance by adding a PCI Express x16 graphics card, but there isn't enough room for a long or double-width card. Without a noisy graphics cooling fan, the Atlas is one of the quietest PCs of its size that we've reviewed.

If you do upgrade, you'll need to choose a quiet graphics card to keep the peace.

We were more impressed with the Atlas's 19in widescreen Asus monitor. Although tilt and height adjustment is limited, the onscreen image looks bright, with rich and accurate colours. The image quality isn't perfect, as there was some coarseness in the darker shades of our greyscale transitions test, but it's good enough for editing photos and watching movies.

The 320GB hard disk should provide enough room for all but the largest music and video collections.



There isn't a free drive bay for adding an extra hard disk, though, so if you need more space you'll have to replace the existing disk or connect an external drive using one of the five USB or two FireWire ports. There's no memory card reader, but there is a floppy drive; we'd have preferred it the other way around.

Gladiator supplies this computer with Logitech's Cordless Desktop S-510, which is reviewed in our keyboard and mouse Labs on page 117. It's a classy-looking set that's pleasant to use. The Logitech 2.1 speakers are fine for listening to the occasional MP3, but movie fans will want to add a surround-sound set.

There's no S/PDIF port for connecting a digital surround-sound amplifier, but you can add an inexpensive sound card to the empty PCI slot.

We liked the Atlas's sleek, compact and quiet design and its good-quality peripherals, but it isn't great value. PC Nextday's 6-5202 Lifestyle PC, which we review on page 10, may cost £140 more and have a poorer-quality display, but it's faster, can play modern 3D games and has a TV tuner. The Lifestyle is the better buy if you need a compact PC.

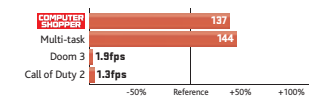
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Quiet; attractive design
- ✓ Good-quality monitor
- ✗ Can't play 3D games

DESKTOP PC 2.0GHz AMD Athlon 64 X2 3800+, 1GB RAM, 320GB hard disk, VIA ViACore9 integrated graphics, DVD+/-RW +/- DL, 19in widescreen LCD
SUPPLIER Gladiator 08456 444666
DETAILS www.gladiatorcomputers.com

PERFORMANCE (see page 56)



BYTE SIZE

SENNHEISER PXC300

★★★★

£85 inc VAT



Like Sennheiser's noise-cancelling PXC250 headphones, reviewed in Labs last month, the lightweight PXC300 set folds into a small space, and comes with a semi-rigid case and an aeroplane adaptor. Though the drivers sit on the outside of your ear, they're comfortable and block a fair amount of external sound. The PXC300's electronics hugely reduce environmental noise, and sound great on a range of music.

This is a fine pair of headphones and the noise-cancelling could prove invaluable. However, its bulky external battery case is a pain, and it doesn't sound noticeably better than the PXC250 set, which costs around £20 less.

Simon Handby

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk

BOSE On-ear Headphones

★

£120 inc VAT



Bose's On-ear Headphones are almost as effective as a pair of earplugs at blocking environmental noise. The set feels well engineered and has a compact semi-rigid case with a quality feel. However, there's no aeroplane or 6.3mm jack adaptor.

For £120, a pair of headphones should have exceptionally high sound quality. Sadly, these sound dreadful. They conjure up a huge amount of bass, which overwhelms any type of music. Midrange frequencies are tight and confined, and treble sounds brittle and artificial.

No amount of tweaking on any of our test devices produced an even, balanced output, making this a pair of headphones to avoid.

Simon Handby

SUPPLIER Bose 08000 859021
DETAILS www.bose.co.uk

APPLE 24in iMac

★★★★★

£1,349 inc VAT



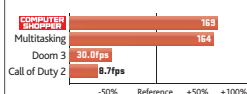
Apple's latest iMac has a huge 24in widescreen monitor. Like all iMacs, the computer is encased behind the display so it doesn't take up much more space than a standalone LCD. Despite its size, it's easy to tilt and swivel.

The widescreen display isn't glossy, but it's extremely bright. It's perfect for watching movies, even from across a small room. The spacious 1,920x1,200 resolution is ideal for manipulating large photos or watching high-definition 1,080p videos.

The iMac did well in our benchmarks, which we ran under Windows XP. It was strong in our video-encoding and multiple-application tests, so it should be able to handle strenuous computing tasks easily.



DESKTOP COMPUTER 2.16GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7400, 1GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, 128MB nVidia GeForce 7300GT, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 24in widescreen LCD
PART CODE MA456B/A
SUPPLIER www.johnlewis.com
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk
✓ Attractive design with huge high-resolution screen
✗ Underpowered graphics chip
FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



Unfortunately, its GeForce 7300GT graphics card isn't suited for playing the latest, most demanding games. There's no TV tuner or memory card reader, but a remote control, good-quality webcam and useful software bundle are included.

The 24in iMac isn't suitable for gamers, but it's still an impressive and slim all-in-one computer.

BYTE SIZE

Kids In America

★★★
£10 inc VAT



The problem with *Kids In America* is that it tries to be three films in one: a smart high school comedy, a teen romance and a Terribly Earnest Statement About Standing Up For What You Believe In. It's also saddled with two uncharismatic leads (Gregory Smith and Stephanie Sherrin), a tiny budget and an excruciating cameo from Nicole Richie.

Yet it's hard not to root for the plucky teenagers as they take on their disciplinarian head teacher. The movie is based on true tales of school oppression, and when it's not mired in cliché the script has flashes of wit and intelligence. The director and cast provide a spirited commentary, although sadly there's no sign of the titular Kim Wilde song.

Chris Miller

SUPPLIER www.dvd.co.uk

The Last Kiss

★★★
£11 inc VAT



When 29-year-old Michael (Zach Braff) discovers that his girlfriend is pregnant, he knows he should be happy, but his instinct is to panic. So when a flirty young woman (Rachel Bilson) approaches him at a wedding, he is not best prepared to resist. In choosing between domestic contentment and racy excitement, all he makes is a huge mess.

The Last Kiss is that rare thing, a romantic comedy-drama aimed at men. Although its hardly earth-shattering conclusion is that, wow, relationships are complex, it is well observed for the most part, with some nicely judged performances. The DVD extras are plentiful, with deleted scenes, outtakes, featurettes and two commentaries.

Chris Miller

SUPPLIER www.choicesuk.com

CHOOSING A... PC System

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

PROCESSOR Intel Pentium D 820
MEMORY 1GB
HARD DISK 250GB
STORAGE 16x DVD writer
SOUND Integrated
SPEAKERS Stereo
GRAPHICS Integrated
MONITOR 19in LCD
EXTRAS 56K modem
CONNECTORS 4x USB2, network
SOFTWARE Windows XP Home Edition
BASICS Keyboard, mouse
Recommended minimum in grey

1 The minimum specification of PC we recommend, shown in grey above, is a good starting point when working out your ideal system. This PC would cost around £500 and is perfectly capable of running everyday office, multimedia or education software, as well as doing anything on the internet. But it's an unexciting PC. It will be able to play DVD movies, but they won't sound too impressive and modern games are a no-no.

2 The size and shape of a PC is more important than it used to be. A mini PC costs a bit more and it's less upgradable, but it will take up less desk space and look much more attractive. If you're choosing a media centre PC, make sure you get one that fits in with any other electronic equipment in your living room and that it's quiet.

3 Interested in games? Upgrade to a decent graphics card. Budget cards based on the GeForce 7300 GT graphics processor or Radeon X1600 will cope with this year's games, but to play next year's just as smoothly (and enjoy gorgeous graphics today), you'll want anything up to a GeForce 7950 GX2 or Radeon X1900XTX.

Look for an SLI or CrossFire system if you want to use two graphics cards to get the best graphics performance. Even if you don't want SLI or CrossFire now, it may be worth getting a system that's capable of being upgraded later.

4 The processor above is powerful and it's dual core, so it will handle intensive tasks. If you're going to be doing a lot of video editing, you should consider upgrading to an even more powerful processor. Intel's Core 2 Duo range is our current top choice; as well as being more powerful, it needs less cooling so your PC should be quieter.

5 If you're not interested in games, you can definitely live with integrated or cheap graphics, but there are plenty more reasons to upgrade the memory, hard disk or processor. If you'll be using your PC for serious desktop publishing, music or photo-editing tasks, you need the same kind of processor, memory and disk space as for games. For video editing consider getting two hard disks, perhaps in a RAID array.

6 A quality sound system will enhance all manner of PC activities. To hear the surround

soundtrack of a DVD at its best, you'll need a quality 5.1 speaker system. Games can also use such a system to throw sound effects around you. If you're not interested in games or DVDs (or you don't want to trail wires all around the room), go for a quality stereo pair with a subwoofer to boost the bass instead.

If you're interested in music or want better-quality sound, you'll need to invest in a dedicated sound card. As well as providing enhanced sound, such as Environmental Audio eXtension (EAX), which tweaks the acoustics to make sound appear to be playing in different environments, you'll get higher-quality outputs and more inputs.

7 A 17in LCD is standard but not very exciting and quite small. A 19in LCD costs around £50 more and has the same resolution (1,280x1,024) but is easier on the eye. Twenty-inch LCDs are available from £300 and have a higher resolution (1,600x1,200). These are better for those who want to edit large photos, documents or spreadsheets, run two applications side by side, or just look important.

If you're more interested in entertainment, consider a widescreen monitor. As well as being ideally suited for watching movies, they give you more room horizontally, so you can work on two documents side by side.

Decide if you want a glossy display or not. Glossy displays improve contrast and make images look brighter, but they reflect overhead lights and sunlight easily, making them hard to work with.

8 The standard set of connectors can be improved with extra USB2 ports, to which most run-of-the-mill PC gadgets attach, and a FireWire port for fancy gadgets including most digital video (DV) cameras. Look for a memory card reader if you have a digital camera and make sure your camera's memory card is supported.

9 Windows XP Home Edition is preinstalled on most new PCs. Any extra software bundled should be assessed critically. It may be that you'll never use it. But you may happen across a PC that includes software you'd otherwise have paid for; you'll save lots of money by having it preloaded, although you won't get technical support included.

10 If you have money left over, consider a TV card. This lets you watch TV on your PC screen and record programmes to your hard disk, or capture analogue video from a camcorder.

